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ABSTRACT

The process involved in planning, developing, and building a resources file is described in the context of a state education agency. The key decision points which confront the dissemination director are described, i.e., determining the client, the client's resource needs, and the availability of already existing resources. The steps involved in file building once a decision is made are outlined, including selection of a filing system, collection of resources, staff development, and quality control of resources. The discussion covers the key decision points and steps involved for both manual and automated resources files. (Author/CWM)

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TO BUILD OR NOT TO BUILD: PLANNING AND BUILDING A RESOURCES FILE

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

December, 1978
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the process involved in planning, developing, and building a resources file, especially in a state education agency setting. The key decision points which confront the dissemination director are described. These decision points include determining the client, the client's resource needs, and the availability of already existing resources. Following a decision to build a resources file, the steps involved in file building are outlined. The steps include selecting a filing system, collecting resources (especially non-document resources), processing of resources, staff development, and quality control of resources. The discussion covers the key decision points and steps involved in both manual and automated resources files. (author)

Every information system consists of a myriad of resources. Many, such as Dialog, have been collected and coordinated by others. Still others have been collected but must be accessed individually. A very large group of resources, however, have not been gathered or coordinated. It is this group of resources that is the basis for a state file.

Before undertaking the task of state file building, several key questions must be asked. These questions are crucial in that any planning and developing of a state file should be based on the answers.

The first key question to be asked is "who is the client?" A determination as to the client population to be served is critical to an information system and even more important if that system is contemplating building a resource file.

Clients could range from anyone in the service area to a narrowly defined group. It is important to determine the client group because the file contents and design must reflect their needs.

The second key question to be answered is, "what are the resource needs of the client group?" There are various ways of determining client resource needs. State needs assessment process, resource demands sent to the information agencies, linkers in the field are all used to determine client needs. If an agency should decide to build a state resource file the contents of that file must be determined by the demands of the client group.

The third critical question that must be answered is "what already exists?" A decision to build a file must be based on the gap between what exists and what is needed. If the resources that exist can fill the needs, then there is no reason to build a file. Frequently, however, resources available in an information network are document-oriented. The current demand for resources often goes beyond responding with documents. For example, human resources are frequently requested. Other types of resources that are in high demand among educational users are exemplary programs/practices. And yet the resource capability to deliver these non-document, non-traditional resources have simply not been developed.

Once the decision is made to develop the file, several key steps must be taken. The first step would be to review the literature on file development. This review must be done in the area in which file development will be emphasized, e.g., human resources, programs/projects, etc. As an extension of the literature review a survey of other information agencies should be made to determine what accomplishments they have made in the area of file development.

The second step would be to determine the composition of the file. A state file can contain a number of components. These components can include human resources, research, resources (e.g., curriculum guides, speeches), exemplary programs/practices, legislation and legal decisions, teacher developed materials, and state resources (including museums and art centers for field trip sites.) The extent to which components are developed should be based upon a review of the needs and

existing resources. A decision to develop only one or two of the components --the human resources or research -- does not have to preclude the development of the other components at a later date. The components of a file, providing the file is not planned and developed in such a manner that it will deadend, can be added as needs evolve and economic resources allow.

FILING SYSTEM

Once the type of file is determined a method for storing the information must be chosen. The resources cannot be simply placed in a cabinet or a drawer at random. There are a great variety of filing systems available as a review of the literature would show. A state resources filing system should generally meet the needs of education. While there are some highly sophisticated medical filing systems, they are not necessarily appropriate for education. The following list of filing systems would suit an educational need:

(1) ERIC
(2) ERIC Modified
(3) Dewey Decimal
(4) Education Index
(5) Library of Congress

The advantage of a well established and widely known filing system such as ERIC or Education Index is that the user will in all probability be familiar with it. A familiar filing system while it can be argued that it may not be the ideal is very often the most practical choice.

COLLECTING RESOURCES

Once a filing system has been chosen, the resources which will be placed in it must be collected. Two important considerations in collecting the resources are - who? and - how? In a state education agency dissemination structure there are a number of people who could possibly collect the resources. These include project staff, educational consultants, state agency staff, local education agencies, intermediate agencies, local field agents, and a random method of accepting resources from whoever sends them. The decision here must be based on the agency structure which confronts the dissemination director.

A second aspect of collecting the resources involves the question of how. Traditional types of documents such as booklets and manuals produced by the local education agencies and the state education agency are easily collected. Most storage systems have been developed on the assumption that a document exists. However, there are many resources which are not document based. How can these resources possibly be stored when they are not available in the traditional form? To collect these resources, instruments must be developed, such as the Resource Identification Survey and the Human Resource Identification Survey, developed by the Illinois Office of Education for the purpose of collecting programs/practices and human resources. These data collection instruments are a substitute for and the equivalent of a document.

Another aspect of collecting the resources involves the training and preparation of staff for such a purpose. Once the dissemination director has decided who will collect the resources and how they will be

collected, the training must take place. If, for example, educational consultants have been chosen to collect the resources, then they must become familiar with the data collection instruments. To do so they must go through a training process.

This training can be accomplished in a number of ways. Consulting firms can be contracted to provide the training. A staff member or members can be added to conduct the training, or the training can be conducted through a special section of the state agency, such as the Planning and Development Division. The training might be accomplished by using all three of these approaches. Once the training is completed the resource collecting can begin.

PROCESSING OF RESOURCES

A key decision, following the collecting of resources, is the processing of resources into the state resources file. A crucial decision here must be made regarding a centralized versus a decentralized processing approach. The model for many state resources files and for the development of state resources files is the ERIC system (Benson 1978). There are those who argue that ERIC is a centralized system and those who argue that ERIC is a decentralized system (or a confederacy). In any event, the seeds for a centralized versus the decentralized approach are inherent in the ERIC model.

Whichever approach is chosen for the processing of resources, certain factors must be considered. These include a establishment of selection criteria for resources, a duplication checking process, the abstracting and indexing of resources, varying bibliographic information, assigning accession numbers, complying bibliographic information, and editing of the resources. The processing of resources can be accomplished from both a centralized and decentralized approach.

The advantages of the centralized approach are initially that it requires less staff and holds down cost. As time passes and the system becomes larger and is automated a decentralized approach can be just as feasible. Remote entry of information via terminals does not complicate the process, providing that duplication checking is done uniformly. This can be accomplished through either checking from the remote entry point or checking of information for accuracy after it has been entered.

MANUAL VS AUTOMATED

Another key decision point in the development of a state resources file concerns storage. The first part of the decision on the storage is to determine whether the resources will be abstracted/indexed. Following this decision is a closely related decision of whether to store resources in a file, on microfiche, or in a computer. It is difficult to determine in advance which of these methods is best. The key here again is to remain flexible.

While microfiche is generally considered to be the most feasible method of storage based on research, the resource file developer may not want to place any resources on microfiche until a certain number is reached. The larger the number the more feasible microfiche becomes. But computer storage is also practical when all factors are considered. Again the question of when to computerize the operation may determine its feasibility. How much to store and which method to store is a crucial decision.

Closely related to the decision on which storage method to use is the subject of manual versus automated files. Initial discussions on this subject favor manual files in the belief they are less expensive to develop. While this may be true, development is only a portion of the total picture. The objective of the state resources file is not only to develop the file, but to retrieve and disseminate resources from the file.

Manual files become expensive because the amount the staff size must increase significantly to handle the retrieval. Research shows that a manual search producing in the range of 25-50 documents takes a searcher approximately four hours. Using this information, a typical searcher who is a full-time equivalent (FTE) could do two searches a day or ten searches per week. When the time for processing the information into the file is added to the time for retrieving information from the file, staff size in a manual system increases costs significantly.

Active systems, over a period of time, provide significant advantages in terms of data entry because the user is not restricted to certain time periods nor is the user restricted access to the logon. However, the advantage becomes apparent when already stored information has to be viewed. This is where the batch mode system becomes redundant. It is difficult and time consuming for the staff to enter information in batch mode systems. By contrast, on-line systems, especially real time systems such as Flight become high y cost effective in the long term. Very little staff time is spent in editing old information and entering in the new. The point here is not to persuade the reasons developers not buy or purchase. The purpose here is to point out the options and decisions points that will confront the Accountancies Bureau when developing a state education agency resource file.

Staff

Staffing is an important step in state wide building. Development of a staff for processing, and retraining of resources is vital. Staff is needed to fulfill the following functions: abstracting, coding, editing, typing/data entry and recording. Depending on the size of the staff, there may or may not be full-time equivalents (FTE). In the initial stages of the development of a resource capability, personnel will probably carry out several different functions. For example, the data entry operator may also be the recorder. The information specialist may develop parts of the resource system in addition to being responsible for the contents of the file. Decisions on staffing are highly dependent on other decisions and cannot be made separate from them.

FILE EVALUATION

State files must have a basic credibility. Users need to feel confident that the file has valid information for them and therefore, must be informed of the quality of various programs in the file.

Developing a process for evaluating file components is no easy task. A decision must be made as to how stringent the evaluation should be. Each agency will have to determine its own model based on its file components and user needs.

A plan for the evaluation will have to be developed which included process, staff, cost and end product.

Several models such as JDRP, Title IV-C, are available. EPIE also has a structure for evaluation that could be viewed with file building in mind.

The key is to determine what will satisfy the user and will make the file credible with them.

There can be no doubt that a state file can be an important asset to information and resources provided to schools from an SEA. However, unless this file has credibility and utility for the user it is not worth staff time nor agency money to develop. All plans for state file development must proceed with the user in mind.

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